

the war inside

HANIBAL SROUJI'S UNDYING BATTLE TO UNDERSTAND EVENTS THAT TORE HIS COUNTRY APART WITH SHADES OF HOPE AND FREEDOM

BY MAHA MAJZOUB



COWBOYS , "BEFORE CAGE" SERIES, 2004
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
73 X 73 CM



I am walking with artist Hanibal Srouji around Galerie Janine Rubeiz in Raouche, west of Beirut. He moves about the place with surprising ease. His familiarity with every corner, every crack, and every story that happened there, and the dotting way he speaks of the gallery owner, Nadine Majdalani – a veteran patron of Lebanese art – is positively striking. One of his pieces hangs with the artworks of the fellow great Mazen Kerbaj, Ara Azad, and Joseph Harb among others, part of the art space's collective summer exhibition. But the gallery selected his "Land-Sea" painting for Beirut's inaugural Middle East, North Africa, and South East Asia (MENASART) boutique

art fair in July. Srouji's rare visits to his home country usually revolve around art exhibitions.

Ask the contemporary artist what drove him out of his country and he would say he was "torn out". The date: 1976. The event: The crippling civil war. From his hometown Sidon in the south, an adolescent Srouji would escape by boat to Cyprus and ultimately immigrate to Canada. There, he would pursue his formal studies in art, until a scholarship by the Quebec government would take him to Paris where he would settle starting 1989. Shortly after the Lebanese decided to stop killing each other, Srouji returned to try to pick up the pieces.